

# MAY

VOLUME 1

BY  
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**MAY.**

## CHAPTER I.

THE house of Hay-Heriot had been established at Pitcomlie for more centuries than could easily be reckoned. It was neither very rich nor very great, but it was well connected, and had held itself sturdily above the waves of fate like one of the rocks along its wild coast line, often threatened by rising tides, but never submerged. There had never been any great personages in the family to raise it above its natural level, but neither had there been any distinguished profligates or spendthrifts to pull it down. Most of the lairds had been respectable, and those who were not had never been more than moderately wicked, keeping clear of ruinous vices. The history of the house had been very monotonous, without ups or downs to speak of. In the vicissitudes of the rebellions they had kept clear, being too far south to be seriously compromised; and though a younger son was out in the '45, that did not affect either the character or the circumstances of the family. In short, this was the Hay-Heriot way of sowing its wild oats. Its younger sons were its safety-valve; all that was eccentric in the race ran into those stray branches, leaving the elder son always steady and respectable, a most wise arrangement of nature.

Thus the house itself derived even profit and glory from the adventurous irregularity of its younger members, while its stability was uninjured. Indian curiosities of all kinds, warlike trophies, and the splendid fruit of those pilferings which are not supposed to be picking and stealing when they are the accompaniments of war, decorated the old mansion on every side. A curiously decorated scimitar, which had been taken from Tippoo Saib, hung over the mantelpiece in the library along with a French sabre from Waterloo,

and the shield of a Red Indian barbarically gay with beads and fringes. These were all contributions from the heroic ne'er-do-weels who linked the staidest of households to the tumult and commotion of distant worlds. Sometimes the ne'er-do-weels would cost the head of the house some money, but on the whole the balance was kept tolerably even, and the younger Hay-Heriot's conscientiously forbore from leaving orphan children, or other incumbrances, to burden the old house—a considerateness quite unlike the habit of younger sons, which was applauded and envied by many families in the country who had no such exemption.

The present family differed, however, in many respects from the traditions of the race. Thomas Hay-Heriot of Pitcomlie was indeed all that his ancestors had been, an excellent country gentleman, homely in his manners and thrifty in his habits, but hospitable, charitable, and not ungenerous—a man of blameless life and high character. His brother Charles, however, who, according to all the family rules ought to have been a scapegrace, was not so in the smallest degree, but, on the contrary, as respectable as his elder brother; a man who had never been further than Paris in his life, a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh; a man of method and order, who had done exactly the same thing at the same hour every day for thirty years, and who was as good as a clock to his servants and neighbours. This is not in general an attractive description of a man, but there was a great deal to be said in Uncle Charles' favour, as the reader who has patience to follow out this history will learn.

The fact that he was Uncle Charles will at once reveal one important part of his life. He had never married, he had always been more or less a member of his brother's household, and now, when age began to creep upon both, lived almost continually in the

home of his youth. It was he who sat in the triangular corner of a settee by the fire with a newspaper in his hand, which he was not reading, in the Pitcomlie drawing-room, on a bright March day not very many years ago, in the half hour which preceded luncheon in that orderly house. We are aware that we ought to have afforded a glimpse of Pitcomlie House, before thus dragging the reader head and shoulders into its domestic centre—but after all it is the interior which is the most important, and this is how it looked.

A long room with three large windows opening upon a lawn, beyond which surged and swelled an often angry and boisterous sea. The fireplace was opposite the central window, and the room had been handsomely furnished forty years before, and bore that air of continuance and use which in itself gives a charm to all human habitations.

It had, however, as all such rooms have, various points of contact with the immediate present, in the shape of low chintz-covered easy-chairs and other modern vanities. Uncle Charles' chimney-corner was formed by placing an arm across the long settee fitted to the wall, thus leaving him a roomy triangular seat at the end, where his lean limbs got all the benefit of the warmth. He was a man of nearly sixty, with scanty fair hair, scarcely touched with grey, a forehead which wrinkled up in folds or smoothed itself miraculously out according to his moods as he talked, and a pair of light yellowish grey eyes with scanty eyelashes, also light in colour, over which he puckered his brows continually, being shortsighted. He was one of the thinnest of men, as light and agile as many a boy, and sat with his long legs crossed in the acutest of angles.

His brother stood with his back to the fire, older by two years, and heavier by at least six stone. He was dressed in grey morning

clothes, with boots and leather gaiters, and an atmosphere of the fields and free air about him. Indeed, he had just come in from his home-farm, which he managed very carefully, and by which he proudly declared he had never lost a penny. There was no one else in the room. The walls were painted gray-green and hung with family portraits. The round table at the east end—for in this part of Scotland everything is spoken of geographically—was laden with books; and in the west end the room blossomed out into a deeply recessed bay window, half veiled with lace curtains, within which stood one easy-chair and small table. This recess, and indeed the air of the place generally, betrayed the habitation of a woman, and one whose tastes and “ways” were very influential—but no woman was present. The aspect of the room was south and west, so that the sharp east wind then blowing outside did not affect so much as might have been feared the temperature within. An east wind in Fife is not always the grey and withering misery it is in other places; under some peculiar modifications of the atmosphere it makes the sea blue and the sky clear, and such was the effect on this particular morning. This it may be imagined was an effect most deeply to be desired at Pitcomlie, which so far, at least, as the drawing-room was concerned, was like a ship at sea, seeing little besides the water; but as the Hay-Herriots had all been, so to speak, born and bred in an east wind, they were more indifferent than most people to its penetrating power.

“I have another letter from Tom,” said Mr. Heriot, sighing and raising his arms with his coat tails under them.

“Always wanting something?” said Uncle Charles, with a shrug.



“Well, when all’s done and said, he is the first to be considered,” said the laird, with a faint glimmer as of incipient resentment. “It is to him that everything must come; he must carry on the name like his fathers before him. Being a younger son yourself, Charlie, you have your prejudices, as is but natural. Your word is always for the others—never for Tom.”

Uncle Charles gave another shrug of his lean shoulders. “Tom cares little for my good word,” he said, “and has little need of it. You’re quite capable of spoiling your son yourself, so far as I can see, without me to help. The girls are my thought; young men can shift for themselves, and it was always the way of our family to let them; but the girls, Thomas—there’s two of them. There’s my niece Marjory, as fine a young woman as any in the county—”

“Oh, ay, May; she’s the first in your thoughts. But girls are neither here nor there,” said Mr. Heriot, “they have their pickle money, more or less, and there’s an end of them. What’s Marjory to do with money? What can she do at her age—”

“Marry, I suppose, like the rest,” said Uncle Charles.

“Marry!” said the father. “I don’t see any necessity for my part; she’s a great deal better as she is, with you and me.”

“That may be or mayn’t be,” said Uncle Charles; “but at least you are not the man to say so; you married twice yourself.”

“And a great deal I have made by it,” said Mr. Heriot, with a mixture of complaint and discontent. “My first wife was an excellent creature, an excellent creature, as you know; but she was taken away from me just when I and the bairns wanted her most. Providence is very queer in some things. Just when May was a

growing girl, and Tom at the age when a woman is of use, their mother was taken away. It is not for us to complain, but it's a strange way of acting, a very strange way of acting. I could not take the responsibility of guiding my hinds in such a manner. Well, and then I married poor Jeanie, hoping she would keep everything in order, and set the house to rights—and what does she do but slip away too, poor thing, leaving me with a helpless bit baby on my hands? A great deal I have made by it that you should quote my example. What would Marjory do to marry? She is far better as she is, mistress and more of this house, petted as no husband would ever pet her, getting her own way in everything. Bless my soul, man, what would you like for her more?"

"Well, a house of her own," said Uncle Charles, no way daunted, "and a good man. I have not your experience, Thomas, but I suppose that's the best for a woman. She is more of your way of thinking than mine, but it's our duty to think for her, you know. We're old now, and Tom's extravagant—and she's not precisely growing younger herself."

"Toots, she's young enough," said the laird; and then he began to walk up and down the room, still with his coat-tails under his arms. "To tell the truth," he said, "Marjory's marriage would be the worst thing that could happen for us. I would not stand in her way if it was for her good. When there's a family of daughters, of course it becomes of consequence; what else can they do, poor things? but Marjory is in a very different position. Poor little Milly is not ten, and what would you and I do, left in a house like this, with a bit creature of ten years old? Her sister is her natural guardian; and what can be more natural than that May should take care of her father's house and keep everything going? What can a woman want more? A house of her own! isn't this house her own?"

and as nice a house as any in Fife; and as for a man—if she knew as much about men as I do, Charlie, or you either for that matter—”

Uncle Charles gave a half-stifled, chuckling laugh. The humour of this remonstrance overcame his graver sense; and that Marjory’s marriage would have been as great a drawback—perhaps a greater misfortune—to himself than even to her father there could be no doubt.

“I don’t say but what that’s an indisputable argument,” he replied; “she might get a bonny bargain, and repent it all her days. But there’s the luncheon bell, and where is she? I don’t think I ever knew her to be late before.”

“Are you not going to wait?” said the laird.

Mr. Charles had hoisted himself up at the sound of the bell; he had folded his newspaper and laid it down upon his seat. He had picked up his shortsighted spectacles, which lay as they always did, when he was reading, on the edge of the wainscot, which was high and served him as a stand; and he had lifted the poker to administer, as he invariably did at this hour, a farewell poke to the fire before leaving it. He turned round upon his brother, looking at him over his shoulder with the poker in his hand.

“Wait!” he said. It was altogether a new idea. Marjory was punctuality itself, trained to it from her earliest years, and time was inexorable at Pitcomlie, waiting for no man or woman either.

“Wait?” he repeated, laying down the poker. “Thomas, my man, you’re not well.”

“Bah!” said the laird, taking up the poker which his brother had dropped, and applying such a blow to the coal as sent blazing sparks all over the hearth-rug. It was exactly what might have been expected, but his brother stood helplessly and looked at him, feeling that chaos itself had come, until the smell of the burning wool startled them both. Mr. Heriot stooped down, which did not agree with him, to pick up the smouldering sparks with his hands, out of which the morsels of fire tumbled again, sprinkling little pin-points of destruction all over the Turkey rug. Mr. Charles ran and opened the window, which let in a steady strong blast from the Firth, enough to wither up the very soul of any man not to the manner born. “Bless my soul!” they both said, between the fire and the cold, in confusion and discouragement. It was entirely Marjory’s fault. Why was not Marjory at home? What did she mean by staying out at an hour when she was so much wanted? Mr. Heriot spoke quite sharply when old Fleming, the butler, came to answer the bell. “Where is Miss Marjory?” he said. “Come and pick up these cinders, and don’t stand and stare at me. Where is Miss Marjory, I ask you? What do you mean by ringing the bell when she’s not here?”

“Lord bless us, Sir,” said old Fleming, gazing at his master with a consternation beyond words. “What for should I no ring the bell? I’ve rung it night and morning, midday and dinner-time, in a’ times and seasons, even when there was death in the house; and what for should we hold our peace now?”

“Confound you!” said the laird; and then he recollected himself, and put on that peculiar politeness which is with some men a symptom of wrath. “Be so good as to leave the room at once, and bring me word if Miss Marjory has come in,” he said.

Mr. Charles by this time had closed the window, subdued by his brother's unusual fractiousness. "Tom's letter must have been more trying than ordinary," he said to himself, and then in the curious pause that followed he looked at his watch. A quarter to two o'clock! In the memory of man it had not been known that the Pitcomlie household should be later than half-past one, in sitting down to its luncheon. Mr. Charles did not know what to do with himself. In his scheme of existence this half hour, and no other, was filled with lunch. He had other duties for all the other half hours, and every one of them must be pushed out of its proper place by May's singular error. This fretted him more than he could say. He walked about the room with his hands in his pockets and in much bewilderment of soul. "If you will not come, I will go by myself," he said at length to his brother, "I can't afford to lose all my afternoon. May must have stayed in Comlie with old Aunt Jean for lunch."

"Lose your afternoon!" said Mr. Heriot. "Bless my soul, what's your afternoon, an idle man! If it had been me that had complained"—

"There's Scotch collops," said old Fleming, suddenly appearing at the door, "and chicken with cucumber. They'll both spoil if they're no eaten; and Miss Marjory's not to be seen, no even from the towerhead where I sent little James to look. You'll do her little good waiting, if I may make so bold to say so, and the good meat will be spoiled."

"I told you so," said Mr. Charles, who profited by this interruption to march briskly past Fleming and hasten to the dining-room. Mr. Heriot followed him with a less satisfied air; and the two gentlemen placed themselves at table, and being hungry

eat a hearty meal and said no more about Marjory. Her absence indeed was nothing to be anxious about, and the chicken and cucumber was very good, as were also the Scotch collops, a dish for which Mrs. Simpson, the cook, was famous. Mrs. Simpson, indeed, was famous for a great many things; she was partly the creation and partly the instructress of Mr. Charles Hay-Heriot himself, to whom she had been solemnly bequeathed by one of his old friends in Edinburgh, who had bragged of her greatly in his life-time, and had meant to survive her, and publish her lore in a book. But it was she who had survived instead, and Mr. Charles was of opinion that he himself had immensely improved her. She was supposed to be the last depositary of many old Scotch recipes, the only person who knew how to send up Friar's chicken, and a howtowdie with drappit eggs. The Scotch collops were brown and fragrant, sending a delicious flavour through all the house, and the little momentary annoyance of the past half hour sank into insignificance before them. The two gentlemen made a hearty meal, both of them having had fresh air enough to make it acceptable, and talked of other things. With Fleming behind his master's chair, even Tom's letter became no matter for discussion, and though the table with its two vacant places looked somewhat dreary, there was no further remark made on that subject. "They are dining with old Aunt Jean," Mr. Charles said to himself; and as for his brother he was a little ashamed of the fuss he had made. That fuss had not been, as he very well knew, for Marjory's absence, but because Tom's letter was such a one as irritates a parent; and Mr. Charles' readiness to side against Tom in all domestic controversies irritated the father still further, who did not choose that any one but himself should blame his heir. Indeed one of Mr. Heriot's chief grievances against his eldest son was this way he had of laying himself open to animadversion. He felt it was against the dignity of all eldest

sons and heads of houses that this should be possible. The Charlies of life, the younger sons, the girls, were open to reasonable discussion; but when the heir thus exposed himself, all family discipline and subordination was in danger. It was almost as bad as if he himself, Thomas Hay-Heriot of Pitcomlie, had been openly criticised by his family. And Tom was a young man who continually laid himself open to animadversion. Even Fleming had been known to have his fling at him, and the only one of Marjory's revolutionary qualities which really annoyed her father, was her want of proper respect for her brother's position. He had been the eldest son himself, and had always been treated with the highest consideration; and the head of the house entertained very strongly this *esprit de corps*. He made no further allusion therefore to the subject which really engrossed all his thoughts.

## CHAPTER II.

WHILE her father and uncle were thus fuming over her absence, Marjory Hay-Heriot, with her little sister, had been making her way quietly about the little town of Comlie, whither they had ridden down in the morning, tempted by the sunshine, after some days of rainy weather. Comlie was a little old clean and quaint place, an old-fashioned Fife borough, devoted to fishing in its lower parts, but possessing such a High Street as not one of all its sister-towns possessed. This High Street had a wide causeway, clean and straight, and a broad footpath into which many old-fashioned large houses stepped forward with their white gables, in a true picturesque old Scotch way, telling of better times and characteristics more decided than our own. A quaint little semi-metropolitan air was about this silent street, through which the broad sunshine fell with few shadows to obstruct it. A little town-hall with a quaint ancient steeple stood in the middle of the street, with one square unglazed window protected by iron rails, the window of the town Bridewell, raised just above the heads of the passers-by, and looking as like the little town prison of an Italian mountain village as two similar things could look in places so unlike. At the west end was an old inn, a little hostel which, no doubt, was doing a good trade in the days when queens and courts were at Falkland Palace, and archbishops reigned in St. Andrews. The houses on the south side of the street with their projecting gables, whitewashed and many-windowed, looked out upon the sea to the back, over the fringe of fisher cottages which lay lower, close to the beach. At the east end of the town stood the church, an old church cobbled into mediocrity, but still displaying to



instructed eyes the lines of its original structure, and tempting archæologists with hopes of restoration. It was surrounded by a churchyard full of monuments of the sixteenth century, with skulls and cross-bones and urns and puffing cherubs. It is astonishing how many dead people belonging to that century could afford to leave behind them those cumbrous masses of stone. The Manse, a solid, and in its way, spacious square stone house, stood at a little distance overlooking the sea; and outside the church gates, where the broad street had widened into a kind of triangular *place*, there were several “genteel” houses—one decorated with iron gates and trees in front, but the rest old, of characteristic Fife architecture, each with its white gable. The sea is the background to everything in this country, and to-day it was blue, a keen and chill, but brilliant tone of colour, throwing up the whitewashed houses and light grey stone with a brightness almost worthy of Italy; though no Italian wind, unless, indeed, a Tramontana fresh from the snowy hills, ever penetrated human bones like that steady blast from the east, which came natural to the people of Comlie.

Marjory had left her horse and little Milly her tiny pony at John Horsburgh’s inn, and they were now going up and down the silent street in the sunshine about their various businesses, holding up their riding-skirts, the little girl keeping very close by her sister’s side like a little shadow, and communicating with the outer world almost exclusively by means of a large pair of limpid blue eyes, clear as heaven, and wide open, which said almost all that Milly had to say, and learned a great deal more than Milly ever betrayed. Wherever Marjory went, this little shade went with her, sometimes holding by her dress, always treading in her very footsteps, a creature with no independent existence of her own, any more than if she had been part of Marjory’s gown, or an ornament she wore.

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